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3. THE MASTER AND THE PROFESSOR ARE DEAD, AND I AM NOT FEELING WELL MYSELF

On December 26, 1817 Hegel received the invitation to take a professorial position at the recently established university in Berlin. The university was founded in 1809 in the aftermath of the Napoleonic devastation of Prussia – and one must remember the iconic moment of Hegel finishing his *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the midst of canon fire of the battle of Jena, witnessing the great Prussian defeat and seeing Napoleon on a white horse entering the city in October 1806. The new university was immediately known as the Humboldt University, after Wilhelm von Humboldt, Hegel's distant friend, who was commissioned by the Prussian ministry to draw plans for its conceptual foundation. For the ideals on which this new university was based, I can do no better but to quote Terry Pinkard's very apt description:

... the instructional goals were to be focused on promoting the Bildung – the self-determining self-cultivation and inwardly motivated love of learning and education – of the students there and preparing them thereby to be fully modern citizens of a fully modern state. To accomplish this, the university had to embody within itself the union of 'teaching and research' – two great watchwords of the Humboldt university which were to endure for virtually all modern universities down to our own day. The university thus had to be organized around the notion that Wissenschaft, the totality of the learned disciplines, was an end in itself, that academic freedom was therefore of utmost importance, and that the purpose of the university was to have students taught by professors who were to impart the state of the art in current research in which they themselves were engaged. ... The process would lead to students emerging from the university with the formation necessary to continue to progress through such Bildung in the rest of their lives. Moreover, in Humboldt's vision ..., the university was most emphatically not to be a training ground for the professions, it was an incubator for self-determining men of taste and learning, who would emerge as the proper leaders and state officials of a modern, free form of life. (2000, 427f)

This was the blueprint for what is reputedly the first form of modern university, the Humboldt model, largely emulated in various ways in the wide wave of establishing modern universities in the 19th and well into the 20th century. This model clearly departed from the venerable medieval tradition that saw the

establishment of the first universities and that could be largely put, to make it quick, under the heading of ‘the discourse of the master’ (to use Lacan’s term that we will come to later), relying on authority, religion and tradition – the authority of established knowledge vouchsafed by the authority of master figures (viz. Aristoteles dixit, as the famous adage would go, the fact the Aristotle said so was proof enough, the authority of Church fathers, of Thomas Aquinas as the new Aristotle, alternating with Plato in the Renaissance, etc.), ultimately by the authority of the Bible as the last ground. In such framework philosophy was relegated to the position of *ancilla theologiae*, the maidservant of theology, and this was the setting in which Hegel himself was formed in his student days in Tübingen three decades earlier, much to his discontent. In the Humboldt vision, as opposed to this, philosophy was to assume the central role of unifying all realms of knowledge and bringing them to totality – and who would be better suited for such a mission than Hegel, the man who proposed the all-encompassing system of philosophical sciences?

The first key feature of that model was that the knowledge was an end in itself, knowledge for the sake of knowledge,¹ relying only on its own authority, and therefore the transmission of knowledge was to be intimately linked with research, i.e. the production of new knowledge, for knowledge was seen as subject to constant transformation, development, expansion, progress, conquering ever new territories of the hitherto unknown. The professor was but the bearer, the agent of the self-development of knowledge. The grandeur of a professor was not based on his authority alone, but rather on the humility with which he subjected his own authority to the authority of knowledge itself, as its servant. Hence the teachers formed a community with the students as equally taking part in this self-development of knowledge, propelled by no other authority but that of knowledge itself in its own self-justification. As the German pun would have it, *Wissenschaft* is *das Wissen dass das Wissen schafft*, science is knowledge breeding knowledge. Following the authority of knowledge alone, the research should unfold in complete freedom in any direction required by its course, taking nothing for granted.

The second key feature was the connection of this view of knowledge with *Bildung*, the famously hardly translatable German word – formation, education, culture, cultivating. The implication of this concept is that knowledge involves in the same go the subject formation, it informs a subject position, or rather a process of permanent self-forming and self-deployment of subjectivity. Growth of knowledge would go hand in hand with personal growth, entailing the capacity of independent judgment and autonomy. Knowledge grants autonomy and self-determination.

The third feature is that if knowledge serves no other end but itself, it cannot possibly be subservient to training for professions, in view of the needs of state, economic and social requirements and pressures, the needs of the market. Yet, there is a tacit assumption about something like a pre-established harmony between both parts: knowledge as an end in itself, forming autonomous subjects, is actually the best way to produce subjects most suited for the life of a modern state, subjects

that would most aptly be able to fill all the positions needed by the state and the community and see to the prosperity of economic development. By disregarding pragmatic social and political ends as secondary one actually eventually serves them better than by taking them as an immediate goal. Following its own ends regardless of the goals of state and economy, knowledge would thus be happily attuned to serve in the best way the goals of state and economy. It is ultimately in the interest of state authorities, and of society at large, to allow the free and independent development of knowledge on its own grounds, without any other consideration and interference. The invisible hand, not of market but of spirit, would see to the happy match.

Such was the university, at least in its ideal conception, where Hegel was called to fulfil its mission. He took the professorial position in October 1818, and this was the place where he will achieve the peak of his glory, and where he was to die, at the height of his powers and influence, in November 1831. There is something iconic in this moment, in this encounter, just as iconic as Hegel encountering Napoleon twelve years earlier, perhaps anecdotally less picturesque but conceptually more spectacular: the last metaphysician meets the first modern university.

HEGEL, THE LAST MASTER, THE FIRST PROFESSOR

In 1969/70 Jacques Lacan, then at the height of his fame and influence, held the seminar entitled “The other side of psychoanalysis.”² The seminar was held in hot circumstances, in the midst of Paris in the aftermath of the ‘68 student revolt, so in it Lacan tried to develop, among other things, a theory of university that would meet the pressing needs of the moment. His take is highly relevant for our purpose, since this particular juncture – between the old type of knowledge placed under the banner of the master and the new type of university knowledge placed under the authority of knowledge alone – was very much at the heart of his concern. In his view discourse is what forms a social tie, providing the assumptions on which fundamental social interactions are based, and the discourse of university was for him what provided the social tie of modern societies and in many ways defined their demeanour. We don’t need to enter into any detail of Lacan’s grand and ambitious design, his proposal of the matrix of four discourses as paradigmatic social ties, we will concentrate only on the way that Hegel massively figures in this theory as the symptomatic point.

One should first point out that the very idea of the discourse of the master – which would be the basic type of social tie – stems from Lacan’s reading of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic.³ Since the discourse of the master is in his view the elementary type of discourse, all other discourses being deducible from it, it follows that the whole project of the theory of the four discourses is massively placed under Hegel’s banner, it hinges at its core on a certain account of the Hegelian dialectic. To make it quick, the upshot of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic was the passage from the physical power, the life and death struggle between two individuals for supremacy, to the power of the symbolic, where the master, in his

relation to the slave, is relegated to symbolic forms of domination, ultimately to the sign of the master, the master-signifier as the core of symbolic efficacy. As Lacan strikingly put it, “To make people work is even more tiresome than to work oneself, if one really had to do it. The Master never does it. He gives a sign, the Master-signifier, and everybody starts running” (202f). This master-signifier is in itself senseless, yet it detains the key to the symbolic sway, the way that domination depends on a sign, not on superior strength. But the slave on the other side of this basic relation has to possess a knowledge, a know-how, in order to be able to carry out work, to crack the obstinacy of objectivity and by his work make it compliant to the needs and whims of the master. In such a constellation of mastery vs. knowledge, philosophy, since its origin, presented a paradoxical and highly significant twist. Philosophy, to put Lacan’s view in a nutshell, was initially based on spoliation, a theft of the slave’s knowledge; its major feat was to appropriate slave’s know-how and to turn it into an epistemic knowledge, extricated from its practical embeddedness and utility.

What does philosophy show in all its evolution? It’s this – the theft, the robbery, the subtraction of knowledge from slavery by the operation of the master. ... The function of episteme, specified as transmittable knowledge ... is always entirely borrowed from the techniques of handcraft [*techniques artisanales*], that is to say pertaining to the slave. What is at stake is to extract their essence so that this knowledge can become the knowledge of the master. (21)⁴

There is an opposition: on the one hand we have slave’s knowledge, the starting point of knowledge, but it is a practical knowledge, a know-how, a *savoir faire*, a knowledge pertaining to handcraft, to the crafts, a crafty knowledge which makes work possible, for there is no work without knowledge. On the other hand we have the episteme, the epistemological purified knowledge, the theoretical knowledge, knowledge to be transmitted as pure knowledge, which appears on the side of the master – and indeed philosophy was, from the outset, the pastime of masters. There was, at the very origin of philosophy, a transition from master to knowledge, yet firmly placed in the framework of the master’s authority. At the end of the long line of development of philosophy Hegel still presents the figure of the master, its last avatar, the one who spells out this logic:

It is clear that his truth is hidden from him [from the master, in the discourse of the master], and a certain Hegel stated that it is delivered to him by the work of the slave. There you have it; however, it is a discourse of the master, this discourse of Hegel’s, which relies on substituting the State for the master through the long pathway of culture, culminating in absolute knowledge. (op. cit., 90)

So Hegel, the proponent of universal knowledge, is ultimately still endorsing the Master. The master-slave story is but a nutshell, a bud from which a political theory is to be developed, its consequences drawn out. The structural inequality that the master-slave relation was based upon has to be overcome, superseded by

recognition among equals (*Anerkennung*), by the ethical substance of community and by the rule of universal law, that is, of an ideal abstract common master in relation to which all are treated as equals. The master had to become disembodied, or rather, in a further step, he is incarnated in the State. And Hegel, notoriously, was the Prussian State philosopher, or so the story goes. So we have the slide leading from the master to the State, the substitution of the State for the master, as Lacan compresses the story, as Hegel's way of endorsing mastery. The pathway of culture (*Bildung*) is the long process of education leading from the enforced obedience to the master to the freely chosen obedience to the State as the incarnation of Reason. If the master was from the outset relegated to a sign, the master-signifier, then at the end of this story the master is dethroned, as it were, by being enthroned as the Hegelian monarch, merely relegated to his signature and putting the dot on the i, the figure of mere sign and of impotence in the midst of reason. So in this view Hegel still endorses philosophy as the discourse of the master and maintains mastery in its ultimate emptied out and universalised form.

Yet, a hundred pages on in Lacan's seminar we are surprised to learn the following:

Hegel is the sublime representative of the discourse of knowledge, that is, of university knowledge. – Among us in France you can only find philosophers walking the streets, as members of provincial societies, like Maine de Biran, or among people like Descartes who wander around Europe. ... Among us you don't find philosophers in universities. This can be seen as our advantage. But in Germany you find them in the University. (200)

Hegel is now cast in another role, that of the key proponent of the university discourse – has Lacan changed his mind from February to June 1970?

First of all, what is at stake is not only the fact that Hegel happened to be a university professor by profession. The problem is that university is already inscribed in the position from which he speaks, as a philosopher he places himself in the paradigmatic place of the representative of the university. According to his habitus, his fundamental bearing, he couldn't possibly be anything else, e.g. a lens grinder, a cosmopolitan traveller, a persecuted sage or an eccentric genius. The formative place of expression of his knowledge is the university, which, historically, at this point for the first time really appears in its modern sense. But this is not all; one could say that Hegel universalises university, he turns the whole of the world – all regions of being, logic, nature and culture alike, all philosophical attitudes and theories, all subject positions – he turns all this into a single progressive path of knowledge, the self-development of a universal system of knowledge, the most massive university imaginable. The world is part of university, not the other way round; all of our activity is caught up in university discourse, in the Hegelian system we are all students (including and in the first place Hegel himself), we are always studying for exams, taking more and more advanced courses and acquiring more and more grades, we are trapped in a program of permanent education, until the ultimate grade, the absolute knowledge, the PhD to finish all PhDs. World history is the world university.

Is Hegel then the paramount university professor? It seems that he fits this role as well as, or rather better than that of the master. Or rather the two roles are not really in contradiction, he can appear as an ideal agent of the master precisely insofar he is an agent of universal knowledge, presenting precisely the point of transition between the old forms of mastery and the modern ones. The ideal Professor has for the first time, and the last, succeeded in resolving the universality of knowledge into an all-encompassing system, where he can construe the authority and the State as an embodiment of philosophy, an incarnation of Reason. In the discourse of university, knowledge is in the position of the agent and in a *quid pro quo* it can appear that authority, along with all institutions of power, stems from knowledge, it is the knowledge which institutes power as a moment of its own internal self-development which can posit all its presuppositions and thus abolish them. It is the mastery universalised to the degree that the master himself can be reduced to the mere impotent figure of the monarch.

By qualifying Hegel alternately as the vintage figure of the master at the moment of the demise of metaphysical tradition (framed by the discourse of the master), and the vintage figure of professor at the moment of the birth of university discourse, Lacan places Hegel at the most spectacular juncture. Historically, it is not only that Hegel is placed precisely at the point of inauguration of the modern university, it is also the point of the aftermath of the French revolution, that event which inspired so much enthusiasm in Hegel, to its normalisation in modern societies – the slide from revolution to normalisation where knowledge appears as the ideal medium of both? After all, university is, among other things, to this day also the best neutraliser of revolutions, it receives them happily into its bosom and turns them into an affair of knowledge – the best witness is May '68. University particularly adores the label of 'subversive knowledge,' it alleviates its bad conscience, it swallows it with enhanced appetite. Hegel was the one who, through the shattering break of revolution, passed from master to professor, from one universe to another, from the pre-modern underpinnings to fully blown modernity.

Since Lacan opposes the French and the German ways of treating university, the subsequent vagaries of German and French fates of philosophy and university are highly telling. Most significantly, the philosophers that one cannot find in the German university, this otherwise ideal place for philosophers, are Marx, Nietzsche and Freud (preceded by Kierkegaard). There is no way around this massive fact: the major breaks in the post-Hegelian philosophy, the crucial points of our inspiration today, happened outside the university framework. In the 20th century one can consider the strange case of Wittgenstein, who despite his foothold in Cambridge in the thirties arrived at his major breakthroughs outside of university and was, by his life and demeanour, anything but a professor. A most paradoxical place would have to be reserved for Heidegger: to make it quick, one could say that his project was a return to a fundamental thinking that would be recalcitrant to the university discourse, a way of thinking which would retain the symbolic efficacy of knowledge that the university discourse has neutralised and thwarted, the capacity of knowledge to stir truth, something that university discourse, by all its promotion of knowledge, has rendered virtually impossible. Yet, from this radical critical

stance, this project produced its most catastrophic moment precisely in its intersection with University, in *Rektoratsrede*, which one can read as a program for a University not based on university discourse – the moment when the thought opposed to university discourse provided, in a highly political gesture, the starting point of a proposal to reform University inextricably mixed with the most fateful new form of domination. – Anyway, in the time after Hegel philosophers were actually not so easy to find in German universities – the greatest moments of German philosophy were perhaps produced outside, and then eventually recuperated by University.⁵

In France, it seems that in many respects the situation has rather become the reverse of the German one: there is, to be sure, a whole tradition of grand philosophical figures outside the university, above all Sartre and Lacan, but also Bataille, Blanchot and several others, but the telling thing is that even the philosophers in the university, who often hold the most prestigious positions, actually see themselves, are generally perceived as, and behave like outsiders. They present themselves as an underground movement inside university, a bunch of guerrilla fighters who have to take on a temporary disguise, an alias – consider the cases of Althusser, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Badiou, to name just the most famous. Is this to be read as a disavowal of their position, so that the ideal proponents of university discourse are ultimately those who present its inner opposition, the salient subversion complementing and secretly endorsing the mainstream, or are they really introducing something else and essentially different, offering a way out of the impasses of university discourse? I will leave this question in suspense. I can only add as an aside that on more common level, leaving aside the big names, it belongs to the most conformist academic behaviour to rant against academia. ‘I am not an academic’ is often to be read on the model of Freud’s ‘This is not my mother.’

WHO IS AFRAID OF THE ABSOLUTE KNOWLEDGE?

But let us go back to Hegel. Is he to be seen as the master or the professor, and does one have to decide? Or is he the seamless transition and the secret alliance between the two? Or should one rather see him as the intersection of the two circles, to use Lacan’s favourite didactical prop, where the intersection belongs to neither, yet secretly holding both together, but as an entity which has to fall out in order for the two areas to be established, circumscribed and opposed? Something that becomes invisible in the neat division into two discourses?

On closer inspection the two roles attributed to Hegel, master and professor, actually do not fit him as well as it may seem, if one looks at the historical evidence of his posterity. It is obvious that neither the state nor the university ever followed Hegel’s footsteps, their subsequent development took a completely non-Hegelian, or even anti-Hegelian course. Hegelianism as a state philosophy and Hegelianism as a model of university knowledge have rather acquired the status of a fantasy, or even of a horror show, an object of dread, a figure against which it was deemed necessary to establish fundamentally different models of politics and

knowledge. Hegel's ghost, in the disguise of the Master and the Professor, largely served as a warning and as a straw-man, not as a model to follow. Obviously, the subsequently prevailing liberal political theory, in its assumptions about the nature of state and political power, is at the opposite end of Hegel, and it took an incredible feat of imagination, a masterpiece of conjuring to see the triumph of liberal democracy as the Hegelian end of history (as in Fukuyama's notorious book which marked another historical moment of transition). And if we cast a superficial glance at the entire development of post-Hegelian philosophy, if I take the liberty of simplifying the general thrust to the outmost, we can easily see that it basically defined itself as a farewell to Hegel, a way out of the Hegelian trap, be it in its Marxist or Nietzschean variety, or in the whole analytical tradition and the theory of science, the phenomenological and the Heideggerian tradition, down to structuralism, post-structuralism and post-modernism. The slogan of 'the end of metaphysics,' shared in one way or another by all these extremely varied traditions (even if understood in very different ways), always meant, in the most immediate sense, the departure from the last, i.e. from the paramount and the most notorious of all metaphysicians. Hegel, the instigator of modernity and of the era of university discourse, had to be retroactively obliterated and expelled for modernity and university to function. He may well appear to be the paradigmatic case of the discourse of the master and the university discourse, yet the modern forms of domination and of knowledge rather took him as the model opponent (or a model straw-man) against which they established themselves. Paradoxically, the university discourse could only function as the disavowal of Hegel, its initiator and vanishing mediator.

If an ultimate proof was needed of the untenable nature of Hegel's position, one could always produce the most obvious exhibit, the absolute knowledge, the ostensible shorthand for the Hegelian fallacy. The mere mention of this term was enough, and – unfortunately – also Lacan followed the general thrust in this respect. One can put it in a simple thesis: Hegel may well have stood at the origin of university discourse, but it is clear that someone who raises a claim to absolute knowledge cannot possibly be placed within its framework, so that this extreme point had to be repressed and abandoned in order for the modern university to be established. For knowledge, the protagonist of university discourse, can only be assessed, gauged, weighed, judged, proven or refuted on the condition that it is not absolute, one has to scrutinise any knowledge with a cool and impartial eye in order to be admitted as justified. University is the great leveller and neutraliser of knowledge.

The paradox of absolute knowledge is that it appears as an antiquated rest of the metaphysical tradition, its cumbersome refuse, but it occupies this position of the rest precisely in its extreme claim to universality, as if the very excess of universality starts to function as the rest, as a moment recalcitrant to universality. The extreme claim to reason is what appears unreasonable in Hegel, the excess of reason defies the post-Hegelian reason. The figure of absolute knowledge is refractory to knowledge, the claim to all-encompassing system cannot be quite encompassed. This is the point where the slogan of absolute knowledge starts

functioning as its very opposite: the refuse of knowledge, something to be excluded and disposed of, an outrage, a scandal.⁶ Lacan keeps coming back to it throughout his seminar, following the general course of indignation. His argument is that absolute knowledge “would only be to mark the annulment, the failure, the disappearance at the conclusion of the only thing that motivates the function of knowledge – its dialectic with enjoyment. Absolute knowledge is supposed to be the abolition of this term, purely and simply” (38). It would be *un tout-savoir*, a knowledge forming a whole in its own self-transparency and self-sufficiency, the union of knowledge and mastery, the knowledge as the ultimate gesture of the master. – But couldn’t one see in this gesture precisely that intersection between the discourse of the master and the university discourse that had to fall out, the symptomatic unplaceable point which exceeds both types of discourse while presenting their overlap? And couldn’t one argue that this point which was supposed to abolish the dialectic of knowledge and enjoyment started to function precisely as the left-over, the surplus produced by philosophy, the rest which points to its real? The refuse, the rest emerging in the form of universality and absoluteness, the universality gone a bit too far, the universality run amok, the rest of the all-encompassing totality, not as something that this totality would be unable to cover, but in the very gesture of its totalisation. The absolute knowledge is thus a symptom of post-Hegelian philosophy, its monster, its impossible. If it seemed that the absolute knowledge was the point which condenses the Master and the Professor, it appears that at the very same point it may offer an exit, a way out, a pass, a point at which it is worth to persevere, to work with it, to envisage its symptomatic value.

THE POSTHUMOUS REVENGE OF THE MASTER AND THE PROFESSOR

Let me return to the beginning. Belonging to a certain generation, I cannot read the description of the ideals of Humboldt University without some sentiment of nostalgia mixed with bemusement. The generation of student revolts tried to put into question not merely the antiquated forms of the traditional university but also, beyond that, in some of its aspects, the very rule of university discourse as such. Lacan in 1969 provided the name and the diagnosis, intervening into the tumults of the time. The main target of the revolts was precisely the model of the Humboldt University. The description I gave in the beginning may appear rosy and praiseworthy, but it contained many hidden clauses that Lacan spelled out: the self-justifying unfolding of knowledge for the sake of knowledge secretly relied on the disavowed master, all the more intractable since hidden under the bar.⁷ The revolt was for one part directed against the hidden and insidious mastery which underpinned the university since its Humboldtian beginnings, particularly ostensible in the figure of the Professor who, under the guise of a humble servant of the authority of knowledge, rather tended to arrogate the authority of its master, so that the modern universities, following the Humboldt model, were always intertwined with a feudal hierarchy, reproduced within the pursuit of pure science and under its guise. This is what Lyotard, in the aftermath of ‘68 and its dubious

success, would later call “the end of the age of the Professor.”⁸ Second, the target was the ‘academic knowledge,’ precisely ‘knowledge for the sake of knowledge,’ which seemed to yield an academic sphere cut off from the quickly changing modern world, a sphere closed in itself, distant from the interests and the antagonisms of the buzzing social reality. The catchword was ‘the ivory tower.’ Third, another hidden clause of the Humboldt model was its elite nature, the presupposition of what was in Hegel’s time called *die Gelehrtenrepublik*, the republic of the learned, the community of scholars, clearly designed for an enlightened minority, tacitly reserved for a small portion of the population, the selected, supposedly the brightest, who would by university education and its *Bildung* be called upon to fill the ruling posts in society. The general counter-demand was a call for democratisation, for the free access of all to all levels of university education, with the special concern for the underprivileged. And fourth, there was a poignant demand for the inclusion of ‘subversive knowledge,’ the knowledge hitherto excluded from the purified and rarefied realm of academic knowledge. At the time the subversive knowledge was epitomised by Marxism and psychoanalysis, soon to be followed by woman studies, queer studies, post-colonial studies and a host of others.

The relative success of these demands turned out to be a very mixed blessing. The downfall of the Professor didn’t defuse the hidden authority, but rather made it impalpable and even more pervasive. The undoing of the academic enclosure tended to be translated into a quest for mass-produced marketable knowledge where the main concern is no longer truth, but efficacy, “the optimization of the global relationship between input and output,” to refer again to Lyotard. The knowledge that best fulfils social demands, trains for professions, attuned to the market, knowledge assessed by utility and functionality, not on its own grounds and merits; instead of *Bildung* in view of autonomy, instruction in view of production. The supposed pre-established harmony between the autonomy of knowledge and its social benefit turned into an enforced harmony, the happy match into a forced marriage. The democratisation yielded the mixed blessings of massification of universities that we witnessed in the last decades, making universities accessible more than ever in history, yet with the concomitant lowering of academic standards, the proliferation of testing, replacement of knowledge by information, the quickly transmissible and quickly digestible, delivered in a host of underfunded and understaffed institutions with more students than could possibly be decently dealt with. The subversive knowledge in its different aspects most often turned out to be far more amenable to university discourse than anyone in ‘68 could imagine, it could not only be rather easily integrated but positively flourished in the guise of new academic disciplines, not seldom emulating the common patterns of old disciplines as their caricature, not seldom alleviating the bad conscience of the conservative academic enterprise, now displaying its magnanimity in embracing the margins, and not seldom, once it got its academic credentials, turned out to be equally boring. – This is a somewhat makeshift and no doubt simplified list, but anyone working in the academia can recognise the patterns, although they are seasoned with more ambivalent and complex processes.

WHAT, IF ANYTHING, IS TO BE DONE?

To sum up, at the risk of simplification: what promised to be a revolt against the university discourse, this paradigmatic modern social tie, rather turned into its prolongation, all-pervasiveness, universalisation, general implementation, its strengthening. The demotion of the authority of knowledge, its functionalisation, actually reinforced and bolstered the university discourse. Lacan tried to show that in the university discourse knowledge in the position of agent, ‘knowledge for the sake of knowledge,’ was a mask, a deceptive surface under which one should see its underpinnings in mastery, the enforced social distribution of power under the guise of pure knowledge. The cynical twist that befell the university discourse in the last decades could be seen as its coming out: ‘we know full well that knowledge for the sake of knowledge is just a mask, so let’s stop pretending and let’s subsume it to its social function and efficacy. We are just doing what you were telling us all along.’ – Anyway, what started as the protest against Humboldt, with the ambition to dismantle the university discourse, ran out into the process whose main labels now abuse the names of the heartbreakingly beautiful Italian cities, Bologna and Pisa,⁹ to the point that in retrospect Humboldt seems like a paradise lost. What devil pushed us to protest against it?

So what is to be done? Is there some way out of the university discourse, the structure that concerns not merely universities, but the very core of our modern social demeanour, the modern social tie, according to Lacan? I have no answer, but let me, in conclusion, suggest four strategies, as a provisional stand-in for the absence of a good answer. Something we can perhaps engage in immediately.

First, one can enlist the forces of the Humboldt model, make a tactical alliance with it, as it were, conservatively standing up for the academic standards which seem to be dwindling under the pressure of quick evaluations, market feasibility, standardisation, testing, allotment of funding, infinitely expanding administration. There is something to be said for knowledge for the sake of knowledge, in defence of lost causes, despite all the dangers of the narcissism of the lost cause. There is something to be said for the futility of knowledge, in face of its growing utility, for the nonchalant disregard for its social function. Second, one should adamantly oppose the rites of evaluation, the enforced measurement of the immeasurable, counting the quotations, impact factors, citation indexes, gathering the points for promotion and funding, ratings (why does one always have the impression that the academic evaluation is modelled on the credit rating agencies? Our Standard & Poor’s?). Anyone working in humanities knows to what extent the criteria imposed by evaluation are irrelevant, how the academic world is run by those criteria against everybody’s will,¹⁰ and how insidious they are (and just as all the great credit rating agencies failed to foresee crisis, they infallibly fail to register intellectual disasters). Third, to reach for the impossible. I have insisted at some length on the Hegelian absolute knowledge as an impossible point to sustain in the university discourse, not as a point of some venerable wisdom that one should hold on to (the absolute knowledge is precisely not a wisdom, anything but, it’s but an empty point, the maximal opposition to wisdom), but as an extreme claim that

blurs the lines. At the same time as defending harsh academic standards, one should look for the points of academic impossibility, something that stands up against the tacit academic manners, against consensus and against the neutralisation of knowledge, something that can engage anew the symbolic efficacy of knowledge that university tries to deactivate. The three grand figures of non-university knowledge, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud (and not to forget Kierkegaard), despite their non-Hegelian or even anti-Hegelian demeanour, all produced points which continue to be not quite palatable for the university discourse, and the wide-spread attempts to integrate them into university framework always produced trouble, they are oddly still sources of embarrassment, despite the efforts to turn them into cultural icons. Instead of absolute knowledge one could e.g. also use 'how to do philosophy with a hammer' (or with hammer and sickle). And fourth, as I am writing this with my Danish friends in mind, one should try to establish extra-mural communities. The Centre for Wild Analysis seems to me to present an excellent model, a group whose members inevitably have to pursue academic careers for survival, but nevertheless engage in group intellectual work which exceeds academia, is indifferent to academia, to its insignia, hierarchies and evaluations. The point is to make stark interventions into the ambient social texture, with theoretical innovations, while maintaining the intellectual freedom and autonomy, the spirit of collectivity, the independent intellectual pursuit and the best standards of knowledge, independent of university framework. Sounds like a utopian community, but it is a strategy that can be started and deployed in different ways at all times, by all of us, within and without academia.

The four strategies don't amount to some grand proposal, but maybe they are good places to start, and I am sure they can be multiplied, so as not to subscribe to the death-warrant of knowledge which is going around under the label of its promotion in what is currently heralded as 'the society of knowledge.'

NOTES

¹ The slogan of knowledge for the sake of knowledge can be put into parallel with the slogan *l'art pour l'art*, art for art's sake, which emerged at precisely the same time. The parallel is even more striking than one would imagine: the first one to use the slogan *l'art pour l'art* was actually Victor Cousin, Hegel's French friend who introduced Hegel's philosophy in France. Both slogans can be read, in the spirit of Luhmann, as the autonomisation of particular social spheres in modernity after the French revolution.

² *L'envers de la psychanalyse* (Le séminaire, livre XVII, ed. J.-A. Miller). All references will be to the French original. In what follows I am somewhat retracing my steps in the paper (Dolar 2006) which deals with this at more length.

³ I retain this common inappropriate translation since it is constantly used by Lacan. The Hegelian terms *Herr und Knecht* are more appropriately rendered as lord and bondsman, they refer to medieval conditions and not to slavery. In the interpretation of this dialectic Lacan largely followed the footsteps of Alexandre Kojève, the person who introduced Hegel in France in the 1930s and played the role of the master-figure for the whole new generation of French intellectuals, including Sartre, Beauvoir, Georges Bataille, Raymond Aron, Raymond Queneau and many others.

- ⁴ There is a lot more along these lines, e.g.: "Philosophy has played its role in constituting a master's knowledge by subtracting it from the slave's knowledge. Science ... consists precisely in this transmutation of the function, if one may say so. ... Anyway, there is certainly a difficulty in knowledge which resides in the opposition between know-how [*savoir-faire*] and episteme in the proper sense. Episteme was established by an interrogation, a purification of knowledge" (173f).
- ⁵ The case of the Frankfurt school is also highly indicative there: people who started outside the university and continued in exile were eventually recuperated as the grand figures of German University.
- ⁶ Derrida presents perhaps the most telling point in this respect. He was the only one of the (post)structuralist generation to engage with Hegel at great length, as his most intimate enemy. In his major engagement, in *Glas* (Paris: Galilée 1974) he took SA (short for *savoir absolu*, absolute knowledge) as a formula, an abbreviation running through the whole book as a sort of matheme of the Hegelian enterprise. The subtitle of the paperback edition runs *Ce qui reste du savoir absolu*, 'What remains, or what is left over, of the absolute knowledge.' But couldn't one argue that what is left over of the absolute knowledge is the absolute knowledge itself? Not some remainder that it couldn't cover but the very gesture of its production?
- ⁷ Lacan, in his schematic presentation of the university discourse that I cannot develop here, proposed the most economical way of presenting it: S2 in the position of the agent of university discourse has its counterpart in the S1, the master-signifier under the bar, displaying its hidden truth.
- ⁸ "The process of delegitimation and the predominance of the performance criterion are sounding the knell of the age of the Professor: a professor is no more competent than memory bank networks in transmitting established knowledge, nor more competent than interdisciplinary teams in imagining new moves or new games" (Lyotard 1984, 53).
- ⁹ To add insult to injury, Bologna has reputedly the oldest university in the world, stretching back to 1088. PISA stands for the Programme for International Student Assessment.
- ¹⁰ To suggest a recent massive collective effort to counteract this: Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Derrière les grilles: Sortons de tout-évaluation*, Paris: Fayard 2014. Cf. also Angélique del Rey, *La tyrannie de l'évaluation*, Paris: La Découverte 2013; and Alain Abelhauser, Roland Gori & Marie-Jean Sauret, *La folie Évaluation*, Paris: Fayard 2011.

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